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RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHPOD RUEHSK RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHMO #1647/01 1740728  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 230728Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3930

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 MOSCOW 001647

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EFIN](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: FOR RUSSIAN WOMEN, SURVIVAL TRUMPS RIGHTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite liberal laws and official Russian policy protecting women's rights, Russian women routinely suffer rights abuses in their daily lives, including violence and sexual harassment. Centuries-old patriarchal attitudes continue to hold sway. Soviet ideology temporarily and marginally elevated women's legal status, but subsequent economic woes exacerbated women's social problems. Alcoholism and poverty, often associated with spousal abuse, have also caused a demographic decline of men. The shortage of working men forces many women to work as breadwinners, while maintaining their role as the primary family caregiver, and it also decreases women's incentive to complain publicly about rights abuses. Even prominent women's rights activists distance themselves from "feminism," leading to a diminished women's rights movement in the country. This cable is the first in a series on women's issues in Russia. End Summary.

Good laws, but reality is different  
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¶2. (SBU) Russian policy and women's rights laws, which were drafted in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are among the most liberal in the world. The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation, in its section on women's rights, closely follows the "Bill of Women's Rights" found in Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Article 19 of the Russian Constitution states that men and women shall have equal rights and equal opportunity. Russia has had the equivalent of the U.S. Lilly Ledbetter law (recently signed by Obama) on equal pay on its books since early Bolshevik days.

¶3. (SBU) In reality, however, Russian women routinely suffer rights abuses, discrimination, and inequality in their daily lives. Shelters and rights organizations report tens of thousands of cases involving battered women -- including approximately 12,000 killed annually -- but reported cases are only a small percentage of the full number. Such abuse is not limited to poor families; in a 2007 Moscow State University study of upper-income families, 70 percent of the women reported having suffered violence, including during pregnancy. In a June 11 conversation with us, Larissa Mikhaylovna, a professor in the journalism faculty at Moscow State University, attributed the problem to ingrained social attitudes in Russian culture, going back centuries. Alluding to the medieval monk Domostroy, who wrote that a husband must use violence to control his wife and to show that he loves her, Mikhaylovna said that this belief remains common today.

¶4. (SBU) According to the NGO ANNA, which defends battered women, men who commit acts of domestic violence are unlikely to face prosecution in Russia. The law does not recognize domestic violence as a distinct crime, and nearly fifty versions of a national law to address domestic violence have failed to make any progress in the State Duma. Natalya Abubikirova, who runs the Association of Women's Crisis Centers, told us June 15 that there is little government assistance for women's shelters; nearly all of them are run

by NGOs with limited funds, and the approximately 20 shelters nationwide (including three on the outskirts of Moscow, and none in Moscow city) with 200 beds in total are woefully insufficient to accommodate the large number of cases. The domestic violence problem is also considerably worse than the numbers indicate, as societal attitudes discourage women from publicly complaining about abuse.

15. (SBU) Russian women rarely complain publicly about sexual harassment, despite its ubiquitous presence in the Russian workplace. Although a 2007 survey also showed that 100 percent of female respondents with a job reported having suffered sexual harassment at work, only three women in Russian history have lodged a sexual harassment complaint in court; all three lost their cases. The attitude that sexual harassment is acceptable is widespread among both genders in Russia. Job advertisements routinely indicate age and gender requirements for a position, and Association of Women Journalists director Svetlana Svistunova told us June 15 that "job applications are like a beauty contest." After an Embassy event introducing Russian female activists and leaders to an American feminist, a journalism doctoral student at the Higher School of Economics expressed skepticism to us about the goals of the U.S. women's rights movement. "Is it really true," she inquired incredulously, "that in an American office, a man cannot touch a woman, or else she will take him to court?" She added that perhaps the woman might find the attention pleasing. (Note: Some women object to the sexual stereotypes that they are expected to live up to in Russia. In a May 20 conversation with us, Dr. Galina Mikhaleva, Chair of the Yabloko party's Gender Faction, noted that "in other countries, you do not show up

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to work in a mini-skirt." End Note.) In this atmosphere of sexual exploitation, it is not surprising that according to a May 4 Reuters article, Moscow houses ten times the number of prostitutes (100,000) than either London or New York.

16. (SBU) The issue of family planning and reproductive rights, an issue of major concern for Western feminists, is barely on the radar screen in Russia. Svetlana Yakimenko, the Director of Project Keshet, an international women's rights NGO, told us May 21 that Planned Parenthood International had a difficult time gaining a foothold in Russia and faces opposition to its work from both the GOR and the Orthodox Church. She added that education regarding family planning is woefully inadequate among both genders, especially outside of the big cities. The GOR pursues an official policy of encouraging women to have as many children as possible in order to counteract the country's demographic problems, but many women are reluctant to have children, as they are aware of the likelihood that they will have to raise them as single mothers. (Note: The Human Rights Ombudsman recently released his annual report on human rights in Russia, encompassing a variety of subjects but saying nothing about women's rights, and only noting the need for families to have more children. End Note.) According to Mikhaleva, Russia's abortion rate is one of the highest in the world; for every 100 births there are approximately 200 abortions.

A worsening problem since Soviet times

17. (SBU) Soviet ideology elevated women's status in society, teaching that women should work alongside men in building a socialist utopia. A women's rights expert based at the Institute of North American Studies, Natalya Shvedova, told us June 10 that Soviet propaganda successfully influenced popular attitudes. Women in the Soviet Union were often held up as shining examples of workers making the country strong; illustrating this point, Svistunova mentioned the example of the female sculptor who created the iconic "Worker and Peasant Farmer" statue that represented Communist ideals. At the same time, however, Svistunova noted that even in an ideological atmosphere, women rarely held high positions in

the Politburo or as factory managers. With perestroika, the old patriarchal traditions returned, in which women were viewed as keepers of the hearth. Shvedova said that perestroika had "coarsened" Russian society; in place of building a socialist utopia, since the fall of Communism the average Russian has focused instead on competition for scarce resources.

18. (SBU) The social pressures imposed by economic difficulties since the fall of Communism have pushed many women into the position of focusing more on survival than on defending their rights. They often must either support their family single-handedly in the absence of a man in their life, or tolerate abuse from a man who is present. The life expectancy for men in Russia, 61, is one of the lowest in the world, and a full 12 years less than that of women. Much of this problem can be attributed to alcohol. According to the World Health Organization, per capita consumption of alcohol in Russia exceeds by fourfold the acceptable limit. Male consumption of alcohol, particularly in smaller towns and villages, deals two blows to women: first, it frequently exacerbates tension and violence in male-female relationships, and second, the absence of working men affects women's socio-economic welfare. Both the demographic disparity and the 75 percent divorce rate mean that women commonly are stretched thin by the need to support themselves -- and often their children -- which increases their incentive to put up with abuse. Svistunova asserted that the economic basis of gender relations that has accompanied the post-Soviet era has led most women to view men largely as sources of money. As many men are unable to fulfill that role, she said, this exacerbates the alcohol problem and also has led to a high rate of suicide among men, which in its turn, worsens the demographic problem.

Oppression is in the eye of the beholder  
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19. (SBU) Perhaps because of many women's focus on pragmatic necessity under difficult conditions, our contacts tell us that the majority of Russian women say that they do not consider themselves oppressed. Although women are rarely found in positions of significant political or economic power (as well as other allegedly "male" professions such as driving Metro trains), few report any problems receiving a good education and pursuing a career of some kind, even if the career is not always commensurate with their education level. According to Mikhaylovna, who tracks wage statistics, the wage disparity between the genders -- 15 percent -- is

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considerably lower than in other countries. (Note: In the U.S., the disparity is 35 percent; some Russian studies have found the Russian disparity to be higher as well. End Note.)

However, while feminist goals often include the right to pursue a career, a number of Russian women ironically would prefer the right not to pursue a career. Consistently, both in private conversations with us and publicly on television and radio shows, we have heard women express the intention of meeting a man (Russian or foreign) who is wealthy enough to support them so that they are not required to work and raise a family at the same time. In keeping with such goals, advertisements for beauty products are ubiquitous in Russia; in one recent ad for a skin product, rather than "Pamper yourself," or "Indulge yourself," the billboard suggested: "Invest in yourself."

110. (SBU) Svistunova traced this attitude back to Soviet times, when everyone of both genders was required to work, except "the wives of the big shots." When Gorbachev encouraged women to leave their jobs and care for kids, and provided three years of paid maternity leave for the purpose (since decreased to one year), women did so enthusiastically. Svistunova added that after perestroika, Russian women developed a "mania" for beauty, and in the 1990s it was common "to hunt for a foreign man." In the following decade,

she said, attention transferred to "New Russian" moguls. Such attitudes, while still widespread, are now starting to diminish. What Svistuna sardonically called "this pretty life" (of support from a rich man) exists only for five percent of women, and many others are starting to recognize it as a "fairy tale." Furthermore, women are increasingly starting to view such an arrangement as unsatisfactory, as it turns the women into objects who are kept in a golden cage. In a potentially bright spot amidst bleak statistics and backward attitudes, Svistunova describes conversations with her 20-year-old daughter and her daughter's female friends in which they express interest in establishing themselves as confident and independent, pursuing their own careers and personal fulfillment.

Is "feminism" a dirty word?

11. (SBU) Such encouraging signs notwithstanding, widespread attitudes among both genders remain at variance with feminism as it is understood in the West, and most Russian women continue to shun the term "feminism." Mikhaylovna noted that many Russian women encourage machismo in their sons and husbands; this is seen as necessary in a rough-and-tumble country that historically has had to defend itself against invaders. She added that many view feminism as synonymous with hatred of men. She said that in her opinion, feminism means women respecting themselves without denigrating men, and quoted the American feminist Rebecca West, who said in 1913, "I don't know what feminism is, but every time I don't want someone to wipe their feet on me, I am called a feminist." However, she acknowledged that her opinion was a minority one. In reality, as Svistunova lamented, even prominent women's rights activists distance themselves from feminism. She said that Russian female activists need to "reanimate" the feminist movement, but lamented that "we can't get people interested," because of perceptions that it is too "political." She cautioned, however, against forming the impression that Russian women are submissive; on the contrary, she said that in the private environment of the home, they assert themselves strongly and "command the men."

12. (SBU) At both the official and the societal level, consciousness of women's rights remains embryonic. Shvedova - who was a Fulbright scholar at Trinity College in Washington, DC in 2005 - said that the women's rights movement in Russia is at the stage that the American movement was many decades ago. In Russian universities, gender studies rarely exist as a subject, but are folded into classes on "social problems." Even if the GOR had a concerted policy of encouraging and defending women's rights to accompany its liberal legislation, it would face an uphill battle changing societal attitudes. As it is, the GOR does little to address the subject, and Mikhaylovna accuses the GOR of fostering patriarchal attitudes through its emphasis on "mother capital" as part of its stated goal to strengthen Russia. In 2008, during a State Duma meeting on women's issues, Liberal Democratic Party nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy infuriated many women when he stated that women should stay at home and have children, and let men take care of everything else.

Comment

13. (SBU) Many Russian women seek the same rights as women in

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other countries, such as safety from domestic violence and the right to equal pay for equal work. However, the context in which they attempt to assert those rights differs considerably from that in the Western context. As they often find themselves fulfilling both traditional male and traditional female roles, while men are either nowhere to be found or are incapacitated and/or abusive, Russian women are focusing more on simple survival than on organizing a Russian

version of the National Organization for Women. Until demographic trends in Russia change, the social dynamic between the genders in Russia will continue to discourage women from taking the time, energy, or initiative to publicly stand up for their rights in a manner similar to Western feminists.

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